

1 Kings 5:1–5, 8:1–13

Now King Hiram of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father; for Hiram had always been a friend to David. Solomon sent word to Hiram, saying, ‘You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side; there is neither adversary nor misfortune. So I intend to build a house for the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord said to my father David, “Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for my name.”

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. All the people of Israel assembled to King Solomon at the festival in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh month. And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests carried the ark. So they brought up the ark of the Lord, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel, who had assembled before him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered. Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. For the cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark, so that the cherubim made a covering above the ark and its poles. The poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside; they are there to this day. There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses had placed there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites, when they came out of the land of Egypt. And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

Then Solomon said,
‘The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.
I have built you an exalted house,
a place for you to dwell in forever.’

1 Kings 5:13-17, 6:38-7:1

King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel; the levy numbered thirty thousand men. He sent them to the Lebanon, ten thousand a month in shifts; they would be a month in the Lebanon and two months at home; Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor. Solomon also had seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, besides Solomon’s three thousand three hundred supervisors who were over the work, having charge of the people who did the work. At the king’s command, they quarried out great, costly stones in order to lay the foundation of the house with dressed stones. ...

In the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the house was finished in all its parts, and according to all its specifications. He was seven years in building it. Solomon was building his own house thirteen years, and he finished his entire house.

This Sunday our story is a generation after last Sunday's. Solomon, the eldest surviving son of David and Bathsheba, is David's successor on the throne in Jerusalem. Unlike his warrior father, Solomon does not have constant wars on all his borders. He has a very peaceful reign. He decides that it is time to build God a house.

This house for God is immensely important to Solomon.

Not only is it a permanent center for the community, or at least, for hundreds of years.

Not only is it putting the worship of God right in the literal center of the peoples' lives.

This will be "a house of prayer for all peoples,"¹ in the center of the Hebrew people's capital city.

But this is Solomon's opportunity to put his stamp on history. This will be more than his name appearing on a plaque, or even a cornerstone. This entire building complex, and this is more than a simple building, this is a complex, will forever be known as Solomon's Temple. Even after it was destroyed four hundred years later, and rebuilt a generation after that, people still remembered the Temple as Solomon's accomplishment. This will be his legacy forever.

In creating what his legacy, Solomon, unfortunately, loses some perspective here.

Solomon builds God's House and his own palace with forced labor. Do you see the disconnect here? Solomon worships a God who freed his ancestors from slavery in Egypt, and he builds houses for himself and even for that same God, using forced labor.

¹ Isaiah 56:7.

The Scriptures use the same words to describe the people building the Temple that it uses earlier to describe the Hebrew slaves working in Egypt, under the cruel, tyrannical rule of the Pharaoh and his taskmasters. Brutally exploiting people is not God's style, and it should never be the style of God's people or their leaders.

Solomon takes seven years to build the Temple, and thirteen to build his own palace. It takes nearly twice as long to build Solomon's palace as it takes to build God's Temple. The Scriptures merely chronicle these numbers, as dryly as a radio anchor reading stock market statistics. Those two numbers, though, and Solomon's methods, clearly communicate something about these buildings, and the priorities of their builder.

The solemn conclusion of building the Temple is a ceremony with absolutely as much pomp and circumstance as the Hebrew people can possibly muster. The priests bring into the Temple all the holy furnishings that have been in the Tabernacle for generations. Lastly and most importantly, they ever-so-carefully place the Ark of the Covenant, yes, that Ark of the Covenant, in the most holy place in the entire Temple.

There are "countless" animal sacrifices, and, once the Ark is in position and the priests leave the room, God's glory fills the Temple, just like what happened way back in Exodus when the tabernacle was finished.² This means that the transfer from the Tabernacle to the Temple is officially a success.

The glory of God, though, drives out all the priests and they are unable to do their planned activities, because they cannot stand in the presence of God's glory. Solomon's plans are forced to yield to what God is doing.

² Exodus 40: 34-35.

Solomon built a beautiful house for God, and he built it for mixed reasons. He built the Temple for the glory of God, and he built it for his own glory. His methods show that he built it at least as much for his own glory as for God's.

In 1517, Pope Leo the Tenth, Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, is building Saint Peter's Basilica, a building about which you could truly use the word exalted, if ever there were such a building. It takes a hundred and twenty years to build, and the final design is partially created by Michelangelo. Leo is building the Basilica for the glory of God, and for his own glory. People still remember him to this day for the progress he made toward completing the Basilica.³

Pope Leo loses perspective. Building the grandest building in the world at that time takes an incredible amount of money, and he is creative in finding that money. He fights a war that divides Europe. He does not invent indulgences, documents that were sold replacing doing penance for sin,⁴ but he abuses the practice. His salesmen claim that people can literally buy their dead relatives out of Purgatory. If they pay the money, the salesmen say, the Pope has the power to forgive those relatives in the name of God, even without repentance.⁵

(Just in case this is not obvious, God does not forgive us if we do not repent of our sins and confess them. These salesmen were lying in the name of God to sell spiritually worthless pieces of paper.).

³ The Basilica was started in 1506 and not completed until 1626, long after Leo X's death.

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indulgence>

⁵ Luther's *95 Theses*, theses 27-29, 35-36.

Martin Luther starts a rebellion against the sale of these indulgences, and changes the course of history. Even Pope Leo's successors cannot defend the sale of indulgences, and the practice is banned in 1567.⁶

Pope Leo, and his successors, who saw the Basilica completed, built a building in the name of God, but their methods show that they were building it at least as much for their own glory as for God's.

Solomon wanted to build a house for God that everyone would marvel at, and he succeeded. But was that more for God's glory, or his own? We'll never know the proportions, but both motives were clearly involved.

Pope Leo wanted to build a house for God that everyone would marvel at, and he succeeded. But was that more for God's glory, or his own? We'll never know the proportions, but both motives were clearly involved.

Looking back at what Solomon did, we shake our heads. He built a beautiful Temple, but the God who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt is not properly served by forced labor or exploiting people. Ever.

Looking back at what Pope Leo did, we shake our heads. He built a stunning Basilica, but, to get the money to do it, his salesmen lied to ordinary people and made them promises that the Pope himself could not deliver.

Looking back at what the founders of the United States did, we shake our heads. The United States is a great thing, but large portions of Washington D.C., for example, were built by

⁶ Indulgences still exist today, but they cannot be sold, and any indulgences involving fees or other financial transactions were declared invalid by Pope Pius V in 1567.

slave labor. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,”⁷ did not originally apply to women or to people of non-European descent.

All these people intended good in their hearts.

All these people loved God and loved their neighbors.

But all these people made huge mistakes.

All these people treated other human beings very badly, in the name of the Almighty God.

It is possible that our children and our grandchildren will look at things that we are doing and shake their heads. And be right to shake their heads. In the same loving, exasperated way that we shake our heads at Solomon and Pope Leo and the Founding Fathers of the United States.

What can we do about that? Not doing anything, because it might be the wrong thing, is not a good option.

The answer is clear. We take what is good from what our forefathers and foremothers have given us, and we leave the rest behind. We do the best we can right now to love God and love our neighbors, all our neighbors, and we act on that love in the ways that seem to make sense. We pay attention to what we are doing, and to the results. If we learn that we are doing something that is harmful, then we fix what we are doing. If we learn that we need to be doing something new, then we adjust accordingly.

We keep that process going. Lather, rinse, repeat.

⁷ *The Declaration of Independence* (1776).

It is not easy to keep re-examining what we are doing, to see where we could be more faithful to God.

No one said that being a Christian was easy. It is not easy. But it is worth it.

As the late poet Maya Angelou may have said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”⁸

That quote is what it is to be Reformed Christians, right there. As the sixteenth-century Reformers said, “*ecclesia semper reformans, semper reformanda*” – “The Church always reformed, always being reformed.” Not one of us has all the answers on what it will look like to faithfully be God’s Church here in Lincoln Village fifty years from now, and that’s OK. God will show us when we need to know.

In the meantime, we go forward as a congregation, doing the best we can, together, and trusting to God’s love and grace for the rest. May we always do so.

AMEN.

⁸ This quote is widely attributed to Maya Angelou, but I have been unable to find a specific source (a work or an interview). I heard her say words to this effect at the College of Wooster in October, 1989.